Evangelicalism, Ecumenism, and the Liberal Arts Ideal

(Reflective, Evaluative Essay on Evangelicalism and Liberal Learning, a part of the Sustainability Grant for Gordon College’s “Critical Loyalty” Project, submitted to the Lilly Endowment in 2006)

“The universities need a sound and thorough reformation,” wrote Martin Luther in his “Addresses to the German Nobility” (1521). “I must say so no matter who takes offense… Nothing could be more wicked, or serve the devil better, than unreformed universities. . . . I greatly fear that the universities are but wide-open gates leading to hell.”¹

As Luther wrote, his own university of Wittenberg was beginning to turn the world upside down. The Protestant Reformation, as we’ve come to know it, had many causes and many consequences, and while it was a theological and social upheaval, it was also an educational one. Medieval learning, according to Luther and his allies, was profoundly wanting. Suffocated by “scholastic subtleties” and oppressed by the authority of Aristotle, that “damnable, arrogant, pagan rascal” in Luther’s words, universities stood in need of new goals and better ideas. As the Protestant movement spread--throughout the Holy Roman Empire, to Scandinavia, Switzerland England, and eventually to North America--Protestant ideas and practices of education followed in its wake. Indeed, it’s no exaggeration to suggest that, alongside churches, universities and other centers of learning led the way in spreading and maintaining the Protestant

¹ John Dillenberger, ed., Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings (New York, 1961), 470-76.
cause.\textsuperscript{2} From its (partisan) vantage point, the Catholic theological faculty of the University of Paris was prescient when it condemned the University of Wittenberg as “a whole den of vipers” from which nothing good would come.

In 2017 the world will mark the 500\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. What kind of educational legacy has Protestantism left? Has is upheld or strayed from the ancient liberal arts ideal? Is the divide between Protestants and Catholics in matters pertaining to higher learning still warranted? Can colleges and universities, often transmitters of confessional divisions in the past, now serve as agents of ecumenical rapprochement? As the director of a Lilly-Endowment-funded grant entitled “Critical Loyalty: Christian Vocation at Gordon College,”\textsuperscript{3} these are the types of questions that I have been asking myself for the past several years and enjoining my colleagues and students to ask as well. While the grant has several foci, three dominant ones pertain to liberal learning, tradition, and ecumenism. Since Gordon College is a school in the evangelical-Protestant tradition, this essay will address these foci (or aspects thereof) as they relate to American evangelicalism and its institutions of learning. Trained as a historian, I engage the present by drawing from the past. (Historians, it has been said, can’t look forward without first looking back.)

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To cut to the chase, the educational divide between Protestants and Catholics has been long and wide. Since the mid-sixteenth century, separate discourses, separate intellectual

\textsuperscript{3} The grant is found at http://www.gordon.edu/page.cfm?iPageID=344&iCategoryID=31&About&Critical_Loyalty (accessed on 8 March 2010). This is the home page of the Critical Loyalty project.
authorities, and separate institutions have frequently been the order of the day. Certainly one finds exceptional moments of irenicism, but mutual suspicion and hostility have characterized both camps. On the Catholic side, one need only glance at the documents of the Council of Trent or Pius IX’s *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) to confirm this picture. On the Protestant side, one will find no dearth of polemics against the wiles and perfidy of “Roman popery.” If I may offer one colorful example: in 1750 the Boston judge Paul Dudley left a legacy to Harvard to establish a series of theological lectures, one of which was to be devoted to “detecting & convicting & exposing the Idolatry of the Romish Church, Their Tyranny, Usurpations, damnable Heresies, fatal Errors, abominable Superstitions, and other crying Wickednesses in their high Places; and Finally that the Church of Rome is that mystical Babylon. That Man of Sin, that Apostate Church spoken of in the New Testament.” Closer to home: as late as 1962, the American Presbyterian author Loraine Boettner expressed what one historian has called “the definitive exposition and rebuttal of the Roman Catholic faith” among evangelical Christians of the postwar era. “[Roman Catholicism’s] principles,” Boettner wrote, “are so persistently unchristian that over the long period of time its influence for good is outweighed by its influence for evil. It must, therefore, as a system, be judged a false church.”

From a historical perspective, it is therefore nothing short of astonishing that such sentiments, and corresponding ones among Catholics, precipitously declined in the latter part of the twentieth century. As the historian Mark Noll has recently written, “While Roman Catholics and Protestant evangelicals still are divided by many important differences, the possibilities that now exist for inter-communication, theological and social cooperation, and mutual encouragement are so much greater than even a generation ago as to constitute a minor

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revolution.”\(^5\) Tracing the course of this “minor revolution” transcends the scope of this essay, but since its occurrence is relevant to this content I should perhaps offer a few observations by way of further historical orientation.

First, greater rapprochement between Catholics and Protestants today is unthinkable without the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century. While this movement first arose among missionary activists in the early twentieth century (only later taken up as a leading cause among Protestant mainline churches), its influence set in motion imperatives for Christian unity felt by various Christian communions. Second, and more dramatically, the Vatican Council of the 1960s inaugurated a new epoch of possibilities within divided Christendom, laying the groundwork for a host of ecumenical impulses hitherto unimaginable. Particular importance should be accorded to the Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) and its Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*). The former fully and firmly repudiated the spirit of the *Syllabus of Errors* while the latter loudly proclaimed that “both sides were to blame” for the “crisis” of the sixteenth century, that “truly Christian endowments” exist outside the Church of Rome, and that greater cooperation and dialogue with “separated brethren” was a theological and ecclesiological necessity.\(^6\)

Not surprisingly, since Vatican II, many heartening developments along the Catholic-Protestant divide have occurred. While I don’t pretend to catalog them all, one could mention Lutheran and Catholic conversations on justification begun in the 1980s, which eventuated in convergence on the meaning of this important doctrine; the very visible papacy of John Paul II, whose stances on human freedom and dignity have won the Magisterium many admirers among

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\(^5\) Ibid., 112.  
Protestant circles; theological discussions in Europe on the “condemnations of the Reformation era,” in which leading Catholic and Protestant theologians have agreed that the mutual denunciations of the sixteenth century merit reevaluation because of the polemical atmosphere in which they took place. There has also taken place in this country the much-discussed Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) initiative, spearheaded by the late Father Richard John Neuhaus, of the influential Institute of Religion and Public Life, and Charles Colson, among the most prominent leaders of mainstream American evangelicalism. Finally, catalyzed by a shared recognition of contemporary culture’s moral shortcomings, numerous grassroots efforts between parishes and individuals have been undertaken. To echo an observer of Vatican II, we do live in a “new era”-- far from one of wholesale doctrinal agreement, but one nonetheless of earnest listening, shared insights, and thoughtful cooperation. In short, we live in an era pregnant with providential possibilities.

What might this mean today for Christian higher education, especially liberal-arts learning at the collegiate level? If anything, it means educators too have a mandate for conversation across hitherto hostile confessional lines. Addressed to Catholics, the Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism expressed this mandate as follows:

7 Cf. John Paul II’s encyclical on ecumenism, Ut Unum Sint.
9 Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., Evangelicals and Catholics Together (Dallas, TX, 1995).
10 Gordon College, under the rubric of the Critical Loyalty grant, has hosted several of these so-called grassroots ecumenical encounters. One was a dialogue on “the future of Christian learning” between the evangelical historian Mark Noll and the Catholic historian James Turner. This eventuated in a book; see Thomas Albert Howard editor, The Future of Christian Learning: An Evangelical and Catholic Dialogue (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008). The College has recently hosted a major conference on “Imago Dei: Human Dignity in Ecumenical Perspective,” bringing to campus speakers from the three major Christian traditions: Rev. John Behr (Eastern Orthodox), Russell Hittinger (Catholic), and C. Ben Mitchell (Protestant).
We must come to understand the outlook of our separated brethren. Study is absolutely required for this, and should be pursued with fidelity to truth and in a spirit of good will. …Catholics need to acquire a more adequate understanding of the distinctive doctrines of our separated brethren, as well as of their own history, spiritual and liturgical life, their religious psychology, and cultural background. Of great value for this purpose are meetings between the two sides, especially for discussion of theological problems, where each can deal with the other on an equal footing.  

While sorting out knotty theological problems is, fortunately, beyond the scope of this essay, I believe Protestants should wholeheartedly embrace this mandate and apply it to their own efforts to understand the many-sided phenomenon of modern Catholicism; this mandate places “fidelity to truth” and “understanding” above what I would call a quest for unity simply for the sake of unity--a quest that can obscure deep and abiding differences, vitiating ecumenism in the name of promoting it. Furthermore, this vision involves much more than theology: it also involves the “history” and “cultural background” of the other side.

And here education is central. In order to fathom either contemporary Catholicism or Protestantism, understanding respective educational ideals and practices is indispensable. Moreover, institutions of liberal learning, distinct from both church and seminary, might well be the ideal place to promote such understanding.

Therefore, in the case of Protestantism, what has legitimized its understanding and undertaking of higher education? What counts as scholarly and pedagogical excellence? What and how should students learn? And for what ends?

Answers to such questions, to be sure, do not come easily, for Protestantism has many faces and moods: liberal and conservative, high church and low church, populist and elitist, and

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so on. And this is to say nothing of denominational diversity, the bane and boon of Christianity in the context of our Republic’s historically unprecedented religious freedoms. In short, generalizing about American Protestantism, someone once quipped, is about as easy as nailing jelly to a wall.

To spare us this futility, I’ve therefore restricted my analysis, as suggested above, to those educational institutions that operate under the banner of “evangelicalism.” To be sure, evangelicalism itself is no straightforward category, but as scholars use the term it generally refers to those Protestant communities, born in the revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which have placed emphasis on personal conversion, a more individual than ecclesial reading of Scripture, the centrality of the doctrine of the Atonement, and a powerful missionary and social activist spirit.12 (Broadly speaking, Gordon College and many of its sister institutions are historically rooted in this understanding of evangelicalism.)13 What then is the rhyme and reason of evangelical liberal-arts education? If I may allude to John Henry Newman, what is the idea of evangelical liberal arts education?

Let me approach the matter by speaking both descriptively (how have evangelicals gone about the task of education?) and prescriptively (what challenges confront evangelical education and what future directions might it find advisable?). The contention that evangelical education stands a “crossroads” with respect to prescriptive possibilities has been at the heart of the Critical Loyalty project.

12 These four criteria of “evangelicalism,” almost universally invoked in recent discussions of the term, are taken from David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from 1730 to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1989), 1-17. Sometimes these are referred to as the “Bebbington Quadrilateral.”
Descriptively speaking, I would submit that contemporary evangelical education does not have deep historical roots within the liberal arts tradition, classically defined (more about this later). Rather, it is animated by and oscillates between two dominant impulses--impulses at times harmonious, at times antagonistic. I’ll call these the “activist” model and the “Reformed” model. The first regards learning as something tied primarily to religious and social activism: one educates to produce engaged servants, eager actors in the social sphere, inspired by the Gospel message to make the world a better place. The second impulse concerns itself more with shaping a distinctly “Christian worldview,” an intellectual outlook and set of mental habits nourished from the wellsprings of biblical revelation and Christian truth. If the first impulse focuses on learning for practical ends, the second focuses on learning for epistemological ends, establishing a convincing basis for Christian knowing and thinking amid the swirling sea of contemporary culture. Of the two impulses, the first is more native to evangelicalism as a revivalist-missionary phenomenon in modern history. The second is the result of a long and fruitful alliance between evangelical scholars and elements of Calvinist or Reformed Christianity, especially of the sort expressed in the writings of the Dutch thinker and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), which today finds its institutional center of gravity at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Allow me to elaborate on these two impulses.

“Action is the life of virtue,” wrote the evangelical author Hannah More, “and the world is the theater of action.”\(^\text{14}\) If any generalization holds, it’s that activism has been a leading characteristic of modern evangelicalism. Evangelicalism’s hall of heroes is replete with individuals, who, motivated by the Gospel, inspired by their own conversion, and often in

\(^{14}\) Quoted in Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 12.
courageous defiance of accepted custom, set about to right the world from its age-old bent toward dereliction. August Herman Francke, George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, William Carey, William Wilberforce, Francis Asbury, Martin Luther King, and Billy Graham, despite manifold differences, share in common a laudably committed energetic activism, which has often yielded great good. Bringing the Gospel to the down and out, feeding the poor, helping abolish the slave trade, confronting racism, translating the Bible into the world’s languages—all praiseworthy endeavors which, I hasten to add, admittedly compensate for more questionable evangelical exertions like prohibiting dancing! While few of the above individuals were educators per se, their spirits, and those of others like them, have left an abiding imprint on the credo of evangelical learning. Learning is a good, the credo holds, but it should never be separated from the theater of action and service, for it is here that the important battles for justice, redemption, and love are fought. In medieval parlance, the vita activa is the truly important sphere, while the vita contemplativa might play a supporting role. Divorced from action, however, the contemplative life is inherently suspect. As F. W. Farr of Nyack Missionary Training Institute typically expressed it in 1887, “It is best to know and to do, but it is better to do without knowing than to know without doing.”

A rather different force in evangelical higher education has come from the (largely) Reformed understanding of education as the art of cultivating a distinctively Christian perspective or worldview. Again, this force is not indigenous to evangelicalism, understood as a populist, revivalist movement; rather, it is an import from Calvinist, particularly Kuyperian, intellectual circles, although it has now pretty much been naturalized and the Kuyperian influences elided. Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism, Richard Hughes has written, has exerted “an

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extraordinary impact on evangelical Protestant colleges and universities throughout the country.”

The clearest exposition of this conception of learning is found, not surprisingly, in the works of Abraham Kuyper himself, particularly in his Lectures on Calvinism (based on lectures delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898) and in his Common Grace in Science and Art (1905). In the latter, Kuyper opined:

Thinking Christians can arrive at a conception of things that harmonizes with their faith, that supports and strengthens it instead of undermining it, only when Christian learning inducts us into a well-considered, clearly articulated world and life-view…. Without the guidance of Christian scholarship [the thinking Christian] cannot help but absorb the conclusions of unbelievers. Doing so, he will live with a world and life-view that . . . comes into conflict with his confession on any number of points. His thinking will divide into two, the content of his confession and the frame of his scholarly operations lying unreconciled next to each other.

From this line of thinking emerges the conviction that all fields of inquiry——history, literature, economics, biology, chemistry, etc.—should be approached and understood through the lenses of an intentionally Christian intellectual framework. According to ‘Kuyperians,” this makes good theological sense: to do otherwise would separate some aspect of human reality from the limitless scope of God’s sovereignty. On the contrary, “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest,” Kuyper famously claimed, “and there is not a square inch on the whole plane of human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does

16 Richard T. Hughes, How Christian Faith can Sustain the Life of the Mind (Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), 68.
not cry: ‘Mine.’”\(^{18}\) One should then combine faith and intellectual commitments and not see them as discrete enterprises. In recent decades, numerous evangelical scholars and educators have been persuaded, attracted by Kuyperianism’s promise to counteract the tendency to compartmentalize faith and knowledge. Accordingly, in the later decades of the twentieth century, the commonplaces “integration of faith and learning” and “the cultivation of a Christian worldview” have proliferated among evangelical educators.\(^{19}\)

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In moving from the descriptive to the prescriptive, let me raise a question: is it enough to educate for engaged servanthood and for the cultivation of a distinctly Christian worldview, these dual and sometimes dueling impulses within evangelical higher education? Does this exhaust the mandate of Christian education? My response is a “guarded no.” This answer has guided Gordon College’s “Critical Loyalty” project since its inception in 2003.

Let me first explain the “guarded,” then I’ll explain the “no.”

I say “guarded.” even quite guarded, because educating for servanthood and distinctly Christian thinking has proven meritorious at many levels. Learning as preparation for service of others laudably stands against the widespread utilitarian view of education as a launching pad for individualistic careerism. What is more, learning to think from a distinctly Christian vantage point—a vantage point that embraces normative understandings of self, morality, and knowledge—provides a needful counterexample to the dreary relativism afoot in much of the mainstream

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 488. A fine introduction to Kuyper’s thought is found in Peter S. Heslam, Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism (Grand Rapids, MI, 1998).

\(^{19}\) On Reformed-Kuyperian influences at CCCU schools, see Patterson, Shining Lights, 39f. Admittedly, there are other sources for what is often called the “integration model” of Christian education, but I would submit that the Kuyperian strand—historically associated with Calvin College—has been among the most influential and theoretically impressive.
In short, both the “activist” and “Reformed” educational models possess wholly commendable elements.

However, I would venture that these models might be rendered more commendable yet if they were placed in more open and deliberate dialogue with another strand of educational philosophy. At the risk of sounding nostalgic and naive, let me simply call this strand the classical liberal arts tradition—a tradition that has arguably been kept alive more forcefully among Catholics (hence the importance of ecumenism). Admittedly, numerous evangelical colleges, too, employ the terms “liberal arts” and “liberal learning,” but I wonder if the historical and philosophical realities—the tradition—behind the terms are sufficiently fleshed out and made explicit. Put differently, I wonder if the terms might sometimes be invoked for ornamental, not substantive, purposes: since “liberal arts” connotes a certain stature and respect, it has frequently been adopted by evangelical educators, but in a way perhaps not unlike the way one might outfit the backyard with a beautiful antique birdbath. Yet now that the birdbath is in the yard, perhaps we should ponder its ancient appeal more deliberately.

I’m of course aware that the idea of liberal learning is a slippery concept, subject to endless terminological wrangling. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the very intensity and persistence of the wrangling bears witness to a discernible tradition, which has evinced striking continuity from classical antiquity to the present. Rooted in the writings of classical philosophers and orators such as Socrates and Cicero and understood most generally as the art of thinking well and speaking well, this tradition would encompass (but is not limited to) the ability

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20 On a factual note, the Reformed mandate to approach one’s discipline through distinctly Christian lenses has given rise to some of the most fruitful examples of Christian scholarship in recent times. Scholars and thinkers like Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, Alister McGrath, Mark Noll, James Skillen, George Marsden, Nathan O. Hatch, and others have all either been rooted in or derived substantial intellectual sustenance from the Reformed educational model. For an exposition of contemporary Reformed thought as applied to scholarship, see George Marsden, The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship (Oxford, 1996).
to detect falsehood and prevarication; to make appropriate and judicious distinctions; to resist simplifying complex problems; to admit matters in which one is ignorant; to recognize the relationship between intellect and virtue; to cherish human freedom; to cultivate honest-self knowledge; to value self-discipline and communities of learning; to strive for holistic, not partial, understanding; and to express oneself well and accurately.²¹ Furthermore, and perhaps above all, the tradition has been associated with the idea that learning is an intrinsic good; the task of thinking well is worthwhile in itself apart from what social, political, economic, or religious benefits it might confer. Aristotle expressed this in book eight of his *Politics* when he wrote that truly liberal studies “exist for their own sake,” not because they are necessary or useful for something else.²²

Influential early Christian thinkers, such as Augustine, found this notion compelling, in particular because it resonated with the doctrine of Creation: God, the maker of the world and the human mind, was surely pleased by acts of human thinking and knowing. In a beautiful passage from the *City of God* Augustine wrote that nature “offers… [its] forms to the perception of our senses, those forms which give loveliness to the structure of this visible world. It almost seems as if they long to be known, just because they cannot know themselves.”²³ (The created order *longs* to be known!) In his *On Christian Doctrine*, moreover, Augustine offered his famous and profoundly consequential countermand to the wedge that Tertullian, among others, sought to drive between Christian and classical learning, arguing

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²¹ Again, precise definitions are elusive. My own understanding is drawn from Mark Van Doren’s short classic, *Liberal Education* (Boston, 1943) and from Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York, 1986). Kimball identifies two main strands of liberal education: the philosophical or the dialectical (most closely associated with Socrates) and the rhetorical (most closely associated with Cicero). Perhaps the Greek thinker Isocrates expressed the ideal of liberal learning best when he spoke of the need “to speak well and think right.” See Kimball, p. 18.


Instead that classical culture contained many intellectual treasures, including “liberal disciplines” which prepare the mind to know the truth.\textsuperscript{24}

This validation of liberal learning has ever since been a mainstay of Christian thought—if sometimes a fragile one. As suggested, it has been robustly delineated in the Catholic intellectual tradition, from Thomas Aquinas to John Henry Newman to Josef Pieper and Jacques Maritain—a tradition which evangelical Christians ignore at their peril. But it is by no means exclusively the preserve of the Catholic side. A figure that Protestants (or various stripes) would do well to consider more carefully is the humanist-Reformer Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560), unfortunately often neglected because of his close association with the decidedly more audible Luther.\textsuperscript{25} But Melanchthon scholars remind us, was the ablest pedagogical mind of the Reformation, the \textit{Praeceptor Germanniae} (“the teacher of Germany”) as he was called. Unlike Luther, Melanchthon esteemed Aristotle,\textsuperscript{26} and believed that a foundation of sound reasoning and liberal learning was a necessary bulwark against the abuse of Sola scriptura—an abuse which he had witnessed firsthand among the apocalyptic and revolutionary movements that had cropped up in the wake of the Reformation. But Melanchthon did not see liberal education simply as a prophylactic against social disorder. To him, like Augustine beforehand, liberal learning was a divine blessing and a great good. “If the [liberal arts] were to be consigned to oblivion and annihilated,” he wrote, “it would be sadder than if the sun were taken from the world.”\textsuperscript{27} And elsewhere: “I consider in my mind these admirable gifts of God, namely the study of literature and the humanities—and apart from the Gospel of Christ this world holds nothing more splendid

\textsuperscript{25} I draw here from my essay, “Philip Melanchthon and American Evangelicalism,” \textit{Pro Ecclesia} 18 (Spring 2009): 162-86.
\textsuperscript{26} Peter Peterson, \textit{Geschichte der aristotelischen Philosophie im protestantischen Deutschland} (Leipzig, 1921), 1ff.
nor more divine.” “[Liberal studies] are neglected in our times,” he therefore worried, in words perhaps as relevant to our age as to his,

…[E]ach one rushes toward the mean and gainful arts, they are slaves to their desires and to their stomachs, and they know no god besides these. Only few take care to refine and honor their mind. Just as in a noisy and drunken banquet men talk nonsense, laugh, bawl, and make loud noise while some famous musician is playing, and they neither pay attention nor receive in their ears and hearts the sweetness of the music, nor enjoy it thoroughly, so our times, if intoxicated and frantic with desires, neither listen to the voices of the Muses nor pay attention to them.28

While Melanchthon is a salient example of liberal learning in the Protestant tradition, he is not alone. Theodore Beza and John Calvin, whose humanist schooling resembled Melanchthon’s, also esteemed liberal learning. The Calvinist doctrine of “common grace,” moreover, provides a powerful impetus both for the pursuit liberal learning and the validation of intellectual excellence outside of specifically Christian circles. (To be fair to Abraham Kuyper, “common grace” is quite developed in this Dutchman’s thought as well; it tempers by existing in some tension with the Reformed mandate to cultivate distinctly Christian thinking.) In the final analysis, strong justifications of liberal learning exist within the Protestant tradition--at least in the magisterial Reformation, if admittedly less so in the modern, revivalist impulses that have shaped so much of contemporary evangelicalism.29

I would submit, however, that present-day evangelicals should consider a more deliberate recovery of earlier sources—Protestant, Catholic, and, not least, classical—as a timely and needful endeavor. Let me state, in conclusion, several reasons why I believe this to be the case.

28 Melanchthon, Orations on Philosophy and Education, 39.
29 On Calvin and the Genevan Academy, see the chapter on the Reformation and the liberal arts in Arthur F. Holmes, Building the Christian Academy (Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), 57-69.
First, apart from its own merits, accentuating the idea of liberal learning has the potential to check certain questionable tendencies of the “activist” impulse if it is left to operate by itself. As is well-documented, the evangelical activist spirit—which I view as a net good for world history—has often led evangelicals to the conclusion that learning is a “dispensable luxury,” something not necessarily bad, but of a much lower order than feeding the poor, fighting injustice, or engaging in missions. However, as Nathan O. Hatch has forcefully argued, evangelicals’ lingering suspicion of the life of the mind is not only problematic in itself: it has also undercut evangelicals’ best instincts by failing to supply the activist impulse with commensurate reflective capacities. In short, evangelicals all too often have exhibited what Reinhold Niebuhr (quoting St. Paul) once called “zeal without knowledge” or what Mark Van Doren has called “goodness without wisdom”—a surplus of praiseworthy motivation and action hitched to a deficit of intellectual discernment.

Second, renewed emphasis on the idea of liberal learning promises to help offset one potential negative side-effect of neo-Calvinist thought, that is a tendency toward what one might call triumphalist thinking. While the injunction to achieve intentional Christian understanding is laudable, it carries with it the temptation of prematurely dismissing other points of view, or seeing them only as fodder for Christian critique. Furthermore, educators can all too easily equate the declaration of Christian thinking without its achievement. Now I too believe that the Christian faith furnishes enormous resources for understanding and cultural criticism. However, I would submit that arriving at the “Christian perspective” is a truly painstaking endeavor, engaging the mind and the soul, and we do not want to convey to our students that Christian

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30 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 12.
thinking is available on the cheap. It’s an uphill, lifetime journey, dogged every step by our finitude, ignorance, and concupiscence.

Discouraging hasty or overweening pronouncements of the “Christian” or “biblical” perspective is a potential consequence of liberal learning, and one that might have the additional effect of encouraging broader and deeper deliberation on what exactly constitutes Christian understanding. All too often, for example, educators in both the Reformed and evangelical traditions have employed the adjective “Christian” to denote a particular strand of Christian reflection, which, historically viewed, has rarely encompassed the Catholic side. I would suggest this era is over. Instead, greater awareness of Catholic perspectives---on politics, history, justice, economics, and more---would encourage modesty in the Protestant camp as it opens up a more expansive conversation about what constitutes a Christian perspective. I would further submit that the spirit of liberal inquiry is a necessary, if not sufficient, element in fostering such awareness.

In conclusion, lest I be misunderstood, the activist and Reformed impulses have been beneficial influences within evangelical higher education, and they will, and should, continue to be so. What is more, I recognize that simply extolling the virtue of classical liberal learning is no panacea: like all things human, liberal education is subject to abuse and distortion. Without linking it to the human good, its rhetoric can give birth to Gnostic or Faustian intellectual tendencies. Thus, evangelicals are on to something when they yoke knowing with doing, learning with action. Furthermore, in the spirit of Kuyper, I’m inclined to think that an intentionally Christian theological context is perhaps the best repository for liberal learning; the doctrines of Common Grace and Creation, in particular, provide a rich ecology for liberal
inquiry, protecting its content from seductive predators, whether the political vogues of the academy or the utilitarian-technocratic imperatives of the marketplace.

That said, I still think evangelicals might do a better job of underscoring the importance of liberal learning and remembering its historical and philosophical foundations. This has been a major goal of the Critical Loyalty project. To a conversation table where “activist” and “Reformed” voices have preponderated, the voice of a Socrates or Cicero might prove instructive. Instead of a twofold approach to higher education, which emphasizes Christian service and a Christian worldview, a threefold one might be more commendable. For it would be most grievous indeed if, while aspiring to serve the world and understand it Christian-ly, our students failed to prize the hard, human task of thinking well.